

Night Check

Poems by
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Approved:

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– Bethany Garrison

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One

Jimmy John's Delivery Guy

“Right beside you” he says, passing
on my right, his black bike reflecting
the golden hour light, eyes hidden
behind shades tucked into blond hair,
ponytail underneath a black helmet:
an attractive guy, he could be a model,
really, but here he is amongst us
on wheels, delivering sandwiches,
damn good sandwiches like the ones
I ate after long days at the horse barn
with Mom, back when Saturdays
were for grooming, riding together,
scrubbing the leather, conditioning,
dirt underneath fingernails and then
late two p.m. lunches in the car
on the way back home, both our hands
digging into the bag of barbecue chips
we always shared as we enjoyed our #1's
washed down with too-cold Cokes
and, once home, late-afternoon naps –
how hard it is to keep my mouth,
still hungry, shut and not call out
to the biker and my mom, wait, wait,
come back, please, it's been way too long.

Stitches

There's a scar almost in the middle of my forehead,
just a little to the right, nearly invisible,

I can't even feel it when I run my fingers over the brow
but it's there, and has been since I was three.

My brother and I frolicked clockwise around the house
on our track through foyer, living room, kitchen,

and I decided to make it more fun by closing my eyes,
nothing but pale little arms stretched out in front,

bare feet trotting over the cold tile and worn hardwood
until suddenly my forehead smashed into a door jamb:

sudden blood, ripe drip-dripping splatter-painting
my favorite pink dress a candy apple red.

Dad carried me to the minivan and sped to Mom's office,
holding down my scrabbly legs while her hands

switched between gauze and gadgets until
there was no more blood, though I kept screaming,

screaming, until the operating lights were turned off
and she held me the whole ride home, my head resting

on her shoulder as I sat on her lap, the inch of purple
stitches like a brand that would always mark me hers.

Elementary School

Mom brought in a cake
for my 6th birthday
and the whole class posed
for a picture, vanilla goodness
on my lap front and center
until it slipped,

candles burning into Erin's
white tee in front of me,
the screams; my mouth watering
for cake only the trash can would eat.

At Jessica's 7th birthday party,
I scattered cupcake icing
all over my face, masking myself
a monster blue, feet bouncing
on torn booth cushion,
hands punching balloons.

Her mom gripped my flailing arms
and shoved me into the bathroom:
the timeout of fluorescent lights
and pungent smell of diarrhea
in this Mexican restaurant downtown.
She only let me out once I was clean.

In second grade, I pushed Cameron
off the big kid playset and she fell
six feet to the sharp shark teeth
of woodchips.

(continued, stanza break)

She clutched her bony knees
pierced red with bloody lines
like paper cuts all over;
it was all because of a boy.
He liked her, she liked him,
so I shoved her in his direction
to the playset across from ours,
the high-pitched cry of crowded
swings ringing in my ears.

Pop Tarts

The best mornings began with Mom
toasting cherry pastries for me:
I ate every bit of icing, crust, filling,
licked pink breakfast crumbs from fingers

until we were in the shower one night,
her body perfectly slim under the stream
as she lathered lavender foam. “No more
Pop Tarts,” she said, looking me up and down:

I stood to the side, withering, hands grasping
elbows, head dropped like in time-out, staring
at a chubby stomach I’d never seen before.
My body began goosebumping, shivering,

too big for this world, too little for “fat.”

Misty, 2004

The first day I met my grey Welsh pony
I learned no amount of tongue-clicking
and calf-squeezing could make her go
fast, so my parents let me ride her,
chose her to be my training wheels.

At the end of the ride, we walked
to the middle of the ring to celebrate
our new family addition, when suddenly,
she bent her knees, dropped three feet:
we both fell to earth, a mixture of sweat
and tears stinging my sunburnt cheeks,
“I don’t want a camel, I want a pony.”

Variations on Dry

i.

By the fourth grade we all knew the word wenis,
ingenious really whoever thought to give this
hidden part some attention and hidden they are
thank god, all pink, wrinkly, begging for lotion
these elbows thirst, cracking like my chapped
lips so parched when accidentally bitten they bleed.

ii.

Through the sparse strands
of my receding hairline
you can see tiny islands
of white sand
and if you scratch them
as skin sometimes craves
they will divide and flee
in their dirty blonde nest.

iii.

I rinse and stack
pans/cups/spoons/spatulas
next to the sink where
they'll sleep soundly to slow
dripping, dishcloth wicking
every drop and early morning
back in the cupboards they'll go.

(continued, next page)

iv.

Stripping off pants kissed
 by the winter rain
they are hung over the shower
bare thighs towelled
then covered with warm flannel
 straight from the dryer.

iv.

When my eyes become parched
and I'm out of magic drops,
it hurts even to blink:
the air stings
as if it wants me
not to see, not to be seen.

I crave saltwater

and those slow summer mornings at the beach,
scooping and slurping sweet bitter grapefruit
sprinkled with sugar, my family's ritual breakfast;

ocean breeze swaying the rocking chairs
always covered with towels in the screened porch
where we sprayed sunscreen as fast as we could;

ham sandwiches made with Wonder bread
devoured poolside with lemonade and Doritos
between hours of cannonballs and handstands;

scavenging for seashells by the shore, feet sinking
into shallow water as young eyes scanned
for ghost crabs, conch shells, sand dollars;

and falling asleep in our bathing suits, watermelon
rinds left bedside, the whole room sticky, but sweet.

First Day of Eighth Grade

They told me I looked *good*,
and I tried to hide my smile
like baggy t-shirts covering
thighs barely filling size 0s:
attention I'd always craved
was finally being served,
I devoured it like daily bread.
Feet tore up grass in recess
now for sprinting, not playing;
fingers shoved calories down
MyFitnessPal in class, and,
once home, a glass scale
was the altar I worshipped at,
only saying *Amen* if I opened
tired eyes to lower numbers.
Losing became winning,
small became big until
hunger turned into starvation
and all I wanted was Pop Tarts,
but now it was me saying *no*,
no more, you're not hungry,
you're weak.

English Breakfast Tea, 7 a.m.

Her feet in clogs already pit-pit patter
against the cold of hardwood floors
towards the stove where brightly rests

the red kettle my mother's hands lift
and fill, turning the burner to medium,

reaching in the cluttered cupboard
for her favorite Vermont mug
into which she places the sachet,

walking back to the bathroom
to brush her tea-stained teeth:

the spout whistles, waking up
her children, its cry lingering
till she hears and remembers to pour

boiling water, steeping the blend
for five minutes, then squeezing

the tea bag's last dark drops
from the spoon soon full of honey
she stirs, so that I hear from upstairs

my morning's final wake-up call,
the ring of steel meeting ceramic.

Honey

There was a man who used to sell honey on the roadside
between two small mountain towns, the kinds with only
two stop lights and one grocery each, those beautiful towns,
and everyone knew this man outside of Macon County
selling gold in Mason jars around the Savannah river,
cars rolling twenty miles through the rhododendron
under power lines hanging so low amongst the sad,
split trees that you wondered if there was any electricity
at all, but Honey Man always stood tall in front of
a rickety cart, his mother's, tartan cloth over its oak,
a smile under that white stache, thick and rough
like his hands, like the snow piled on the side of the road,
waiting to melt, waiting for spring, watching over
the Blue Ridge, where I stood today in the wildlife
viewing area, the local woman's words in my head:
there was a man who used to sell honey on the roadside.

Sundays

I.

Steam rises over orange sweet rolls
as Papa glazes them, cream cheese
frosting dripping onto the plate
we'll clean with our sticky fingers
after all the buns are gone –

gone like the fruit salad he rose
at 6 a.m. to make: bananas, apples,
strawberries, a touch of honey –
while Mimi sits in her swivel chair
and plays Freecell, my parents

reading the fat Sunday papers
in the living room, waiting.
Later, Papa will do the dishes,
carve wooden ducks in the garage,
then disappear at his desk.

II.

Mimi and I lay on her king-sized bed
watching Jeopardy when she points
to the lotion on her bedside table
and asks me to rub some on her feet,

wrinkly and cold, with pointy bunions
and bright red toenails, too long.
My hands proceed, reluctant and stiff.
I would never do this to my own,

(continued, stanza break)

but these are my grandmother's:
she thanks me and falls asleep
to crime show murmurs replacing
the white noise of Papa's snores.

III.

Mom preheats the oven for our breakfast
and returns to the small screen in her hand,
playing Solitaire, rearranging cards in order,

while Dad sits in his brown leather chair
consuming the morning news, his bare feet
resting atop the ottoman, hands throwing

the dog's toy. Half an hour later, he is called
into the kitchen to glaze the Pillsbury buns,
and now that both his parents are gone,

there is no more Sunday fruit salad, no more
skin to lotion, so we gather round the table,
eat rolls, lick fingers, and clean our own dishes.

Playing Baseball with My Brother

In the backyard of our childhood home,
sunlight pours through crepe myrtles
as we throw the patched cowhide
back and forth for the first time

since Memorial Day, five months ago.
With each hollow clap of leather
meeting leather we inch apart farther
and throw harder as more is disclosed:

this perfect Thanksgiving weather,
Christmas presents for the parents,
summer jobs that came and went,
relationships pursued and withered.

In one month we will find ourselves here
back again, catching up on our lives
as if there are no computers or phones,
just thoughts thrown around in the open air.

Puppy

While Mom shopped for wrapping paper I lingered in the aisle with hundreds of plush stuffed animals begging me to rescue them from this cramped Hallmark zoo, one of them a sad pink dog with big brown eyes, plastic cotton-candy nose, blush bow tied around her neck; Mom reached it down from the top shelf and I named it Puppy. From that night on I cuddled her tight to my chest, fingers rubbing her soft velvet ears, goodnight kisses blessing her faded forehead, and now when she sits on my floral duvet, back slouched and eyes still sad and brown, I want to be her, held in warm arms, caressed under the covers of a chilled room.

Two

“Snack”

Dad wants to lose 10 pounds again.

 He tells us to not let him “snack,”
or sneak back to the humming fridge
 with its treasure chest full of cheese
during a long commercial break,
 peel the film off two or three
pre-sliced pepper jacks, return to his chair,
 legs propped on leather ottoman,
enjoying his evening news
 while behind him, silently,

his teenage daughter sneaks into
 the pantry between algebra sets,
grabs some double-stuffed Oreos,
 retreats upstairs to her room, stands
in front of the full-length mirror,
 lifts up her shirt halfway, fingers
pinching rolls covering ribs:
 you’re fat, she says, though before long
she’s eye-level with the snack shelf
 again, neither hungry nor full.

Summer Camp

The kids called me pepperoni
and it wasn't because I was sunburnt,
though I was from 85° days on the lake
teaching sixth graders how to dive,
no clouds in sight, not even my cap
able to block the commanding rays.

Red patches plagued me: I wanted
to say *they* had driven my face crazy,
to tell them about true exhaustion.
That when I'm drained inside and out
my face inflates as if begging people
to point fingers. How I would kill
to see the look on their spotless faces
if I told them, how red they'd turn.

Amoxicillin

Before starting antibiotics,
patches of white coated
the two swollen tonsils
at the back of my throat
like stemless cherries
with polka dots of mold.

I'd forgotten how it felt
to swallow without weeping
from the tea's sting sliding
over pus-covered pads.
Sweat blanketed my forehead;
I shivered under duvets and quilts.

The only movement I made
was for the cup at my bedside
where I'd spit the gooey green
and drool, until the hour when
the prescription was delivered
and I took the first yellow pill.

Tonsils slowly dwindled,
the fever faded: covers were
peeled, tennis shoes tied,
and I could feel again the gulp
of water without the pause
before the ferocious swallow.

Famous Chicken 'n Biscuits

The turn signal was about to switch green
as I gazed left at the Bojangles' sign
luring me in on this rainy fall day,

stomach grumbling for the spicy salt
of chicken supremes and cajun fries
and a hot biscuit sticking to my mouth's roof:

my hungry foot pressed the gas pedal
too soon and I heard the hollow crunch
of cravings hitting the sedan in front.

A half-hour later, in the drive-through,
I was ten long feet from the car ahead,
my fingers eager to open the greasy box

and lift it to my face in the parking lot,
devouring that famous thousand dollar meal.

Driving By

Headless bird,
 perched smack dab
on dashed
 white Interstate line:
its feathers,
 still attached, flutter
in the wind,
 each a lifted hand
waving hi
 to me, as if to say
welcome
 to this road, this kill.

Froot Loops

We got a box of cereal
on our break-up date.
Well, I did, at least,
standing there in aisle five
on his right, busying myself
with studying the brands,
reading aloud nutrition facts
to break the silence.
Kellogg's cost \$1.74 more
than Harris Teeter's knock-off,
but it had double the B12.
This meant nothing to him.

We hugged in the parking lot,
my unopened red carton
pressed flat against his shoulders.

I ate those Os for breakfast
the next few weeks, every serving
the same sugary-rush-then-crash
hours later, wondering:
why different colors when they all
have the same fruitless taste?

Today I finished the last bowl,
recycled the cardboard
and trashed the crinkled liner
whose plastic now cradled
a rainbow of crumbs, almost grey.

Late October, Walking to Class

I exhale a small cloud like the exhaust
of cars driving up this hill, their red lights
passing and disappearing like the leaves,
some branches above me empty, others
still yellow or brown; my blue shoes crunch
over the dead foliage layering the brick.

I pass a plasticware set in a baggie,
the kind from a fundraiser chicken dinner,
and further up the path there's a sugar cookie,
uneaten, rainbow sprinkles still intact.

As I slow down I see there are no ants
or hungry birds approaching this golden snack
abandoned on the cold walkway, so I pause,
tempted to pick her up, but continue on.

Less or More

Uncle Fred wants me to do tequila shots
with him in the garage-turned-living-room
where us cousins recline in folding chairs
watching Sunday football, liquor and mixers
on the table next to vodka-soaked gummy bears.
“Just one, come on!” he says, but my strict Dad
could walk in any minute from the backyard

where he’s been with Fred’s granddaughter,
picking her up to fly, playing peek-a-boo,
sights I’ve rarely seen and can’t help but wish
for my future squealing kids: Dad’s already 62,
I’m only 19, not even dating, and I wonder
if we’ll ever share such playful afternoons.
Do I want those tequila shots less or more now?

I FORGOT MY INHALER

With 88-72 win, UNC men's basketball beats a top-ranked Duke team for the first time since 2006.

- The Daily Tar Heel, 02/20/19

Belly sloshing with beer,

arms flailing, I run,

or more like jog,

in the frigid night (that can't really be felt) –

TARRRRR –

a man shouts, farther down the street –

HEEEELS –

the herd exhales.

Tonight, we are all

athletes, rushing towards

the intersection of Franklin and S. Columbia –

students like sardines

pushing their way to jump over small fires,

or climb on a friend's shoulders and sing

Hark the sound ...

(continued, next page)

crowd swaying and chanting

GO TO HELL DUKE!

fists pumping in the smoky air –

I slow to a walk, then bent-over standstill,

and with every last breath yell

I FORGOT MY INHALER

only to hear a guy respond *SAME!*

and the two of us laugh,

the crowded passageways, joining in the congestion,

a mass asthma-attack.

Floss

I couldn't resist the yellow clearance sticker
below the REACH // *#1 Selling Floss* label,
bringing us together on this cold evening
when I really had nothing else to do

except open the plastic white container
that perfectly filled the palm of my hand,
release the thin string from its silver tab
then pull and snap, minty wax wafting
to my nose as I began front and center.

It resisted; and when I tugged the thread
back down I saw the evidence: white turned
red, neglected gums cried out *Fuck you!*
cursing the absence of attention, of tender
touch to sudden sawing: they'll be sore
in the morning when we meet again.

Coquette Brasserie

I wish I could sit on this porcelain commode
and enjoy the Frank Sinatra bouncing off
the off-white subway-tiled walls in this two
but really three star French establishment
in the bourgeoisie part of town –

an ivory linen dress hiked up my hip bones,
stomach full of fifty dollar-bottle white wine
and escargot and truffle frites with that fine aioli
and oysters from Virginia and *Mesclun* greens
with champagne vinaigrette and too many shallots –

but there are only my rough summer hands
gripping pink, wrinkly kneecaps above
sandaled heels digging into the tiled floor
as I grunt and strain, every ounce
of my fertile, well-fed, 21-year-old body
pushing and pushing the late morning's brunch
out of me as if I'm giving birth to Gibraltar,
something tearing, back there, fresh blood
meeting water on this fine August evening
in this porcelain commode, the steak
now rarer than rare, a raw red, bleeding.

Pho

I dine alone at *Queen of Pho*,
the bowl in front of me
boiling inside, rice noodles
swimming as I stir
bok choy and broccoli
around and around, the soup
turning from translucent
to cloudy light orange, a small
fire, just spicy enough: I sip
and bite, crunch of the onion
harmonizing with nearby chatter
and the night's steady rain.

A couple finishes their meal
just as I do, and they exit,
one umbrella each. I pull the hood
over my head and stride over puddles –
how odd, only the man walking
towards the car, leaving her behind.
Why? Why am I eating alone
again, I wonder, driving away,
glimpsing as I turn right
that he has picked her up
by the curb, her red dress, dry.

Three

Second Date

Pizza, milkshakes, Trader Joe's,
then he came over to my house
to watch a murder mystery show
but what really happened was

we went upstairs to my room
to hang a bulletin board
bought earlier that day by mom.
He held it high while I stood

back to see if things were straight,
then drew pencil lines on plaster
and hammered nails in place
only to see it slightly off-center

so we removed the cork frame
and gazed at the barren wall
our hands almost touching, waiting
for someone to make the call,

while two empty holes like tiny eyes
yearning to be covered, hidden
by notes and calendars and lies,
stared us back, waiting for action.

Letter

Traces of chicken tikka masala stain
the light blue paper, little halos
from tonight's dinner eaten
while writing with a Pilot V5,
my too-far off confidant, 2,394 miles
in trusted hands of the postal service –

this is the only way we can touch
each other right now. The tips
of my fingers hold down the edges
so I can fill every space of the page
as if I were to feel his skin again:
for now we will bask in knowing
we both caressed the same sheet,
that he can kiss again and again
the inside of the envelope fold
that my tongue pressed against.

Hair

When Mom pushed all 8 pounds 8 ounces
of me into this world, thick jet-black strands
crowned my big head, two days late.

She cried, sweaty blonde hair slicked back,
face red, shoulders slumped as she held me
near her chest.

That's not my baby.
That's not my baby.

*

I learned regret from a back-to-school cut.
The hairdresser's shiny scissors snipped
the now light brown-almost-blond curls
hiding my wide forehead, inches falling
onto my lap. I had asked for bangs,
and bangs I would never ask for again.

*

I have no memories
of anybody combing
my hair as a child,

though I recall watching
a friend's mom spray
detangler on the shiny locks

of her daughter, brushing,
pulling gently into a ponytail:
a lesson in jealousy.

*

(continued, next page)

In the tepid bathtub, age 11, alone
 with my awkward body and the pink
 seashell wallpaper, I discovered the first
 three armpit weeds. *This is it*, I thought,
 thinking of that American Girl puberty book
 Mom had recently left on my pillow:
this is only the beginning.

*

Showering in the filthy bathroom
 at summer camp, I found a hairball
 stuck between my 12-year-old
 butt cheeks: *how? why?*
 I pulled it out and the grey-brown glob
 drooped in my hand like a bird, dead,
 rotting; I almost threw up.

*

And so every once in a while, I plucked
 the occasional loose strand and placed
 it somewhere distant from me,
 on the sidewalk or in a trash can:
 brief relief. I preyed my hair,
 prayed the stray ones wouldn't touch me.

*

Is a friend really a friend
 if she says that you'll never
 get a boyfriend if you don't
 shave your pubes?

No: she's just confused,
 and dating the wrong dudes.

*

(continued, next page)

I use my long hair now for distraction
at stoplights, pulling apart the split ends,
watching one thread become two,

and other times in bed; he'll lift
his hands to my head, grab and pull,
the oddest little pleasure, for us both.

Yogurt

It's when his pale naked body is softly
on top of mine, lips on lips, hands in hair,
that I ask *What's your favorite type of yogurt?*
imagining cool spoonfuls of vanilla bean
Chobani filling my own hungry mouth –
“Siggi's,” he responds, without hesitation,
though, I wonder, as his tongue traces
my collarbones and makes its way down,
which one: non-fat? low-fat? whole-milk?
sugar-free, with sliced fruit and granola?
And why can't I keep my mind focused
on what our busy bodies are supposed to be
wanting and doing? “Technically,” he whispers,
about to taste me, “it's considered cheese.”

Florence

They said she was going to come
hard and fast, so I kept careful watch
on my front yard: oaks quivered,
pinecones plunged into soaked earth
but the power stayed on, Jim Cantore
reporting how she'd swallowed
the east and would arrive any day
now. I took trips outside to uncover
loose leaves and branches pressed hard
against soggy drains while steady wind
and drizzles lingered, Ramen Noodles
and water bottles unused until

after all the waiting, she finally came
to shake my house, windows framing
nothing but her relentlessness from constant
downpour and pounding: inside, lights out,
I trembled on the bed, with Florence,
lying on my back, legs spread apart:

the ultimate edgers.

Listen

Shivering on the cold tile of my bathroom floor, knees to chest, phone to ear, I listened to my drunk boyfriend driving around telling me things like *your thighs are so hot* and *I want you*

and hours later, about his best friend's suicide freshman year. About the trauma, depression. About smoking marijuana every night and day out his bedroom window so he could sleep.

About mixing liquor with pills, with medicine, with everything, telling me that, tonight, he'd combined them all. "I'll get clean once I go back to school in the fall," he promised. *Why not now?*

I asked, and listened to his silence while looking in the mirror at how blue my eyes were, thinking when I cry, I'm my prettiest. *Just go home, we'll talk in the morning*, but he stayed silent,

no texts or calls, just excuses looping through my head: he's sleeping, giving us space. It wasn't until 2 p.m. that I was told there were guns in the car, and he had not made it back home, but to the sobering cells

of orange scrubs, steel bars, shitty food, a place it would cost \$50,000 to leave. The first boy to touch me, to teach me about my own body, how good it feels to be felt, wanted, like that one time in the gazebo,

eager hands under shirts, then shorts. He wrote me letters I only read after parties we'd planned to attend, after too many shots, slumped on the carpet, pretending he was reading them aloud, while I listened.

Hangover

It's 7 a.m.
 My body, dressed in all white,
 lies atop the red couch.
 Heart beating fast,
 the alcohol.
 Eyes open, in front of me,
 friends.
 "last night -"
 "she drank way too much -"
 "I don't think she knew -"
 "is she awake?"

No.
I don't want to die,
please God don't let me die.
 Knees bend,
 soles meet the black shag.
 Fingers, mine, alive,
 tremble against thigh,
 currant-colored circles
 the size of three quarters;
 it rebukes to touch.
Where are those from?

 "Hey! You're up!"
Barely.
 I follow them down the stairs,
 hand on rail,
 oh yes, these steps I missed
 last night,
 en route to grass,
 a dog on leash
 obeying walker.
 "Throw up -"
 "You just need to throw up -"
How did I get back up those stairs?

A Dream for Freud

I can hear them fucking, my ex-boyfriend
and my brother's ex-girlfriend, horizontal
on the cream-colored cozy-looking couch,
she's on top moaning and saying things
that most people say when they're having sex
like *oh baby*, that's what he said to me
our first time doing things, and the weird thing is
I'm hearing this from my horse's bedroom
right outside the living room, it is nighttime,
the gelding's neck and head stretched down,
munching as I lean against his brown shoulder,
thinking *how do I leave this house?* I pass
the couch somehow without them seeing,
but slow enough to notice that my fucking ex
is silent, saying nothing to her, just his hands
on her hips, grinding, and suddenly I am outside,
jogging down the stairs towards the beach,
his favorite place, and I can feel the salt air
and the breeze running through my ponytail
as I run past two men fighting: I'm about to cross
the road to a friend's house when one of them
stops me, grabbing my shoulder to face him.
I've never seen this boy before. Short, blond,
goofy grin. *Hey there girl, what's in here?*
He reaches down in my tank top for a breast
and I realize there's nothing I can do, nobody
around to stop his chubby fingers, the exes
are still fucking inside and I want to be
one of them on the couch, either one, really
but it seems as if now, slowly waking up,
I'll never make it across the road to the shore.

His Bathroom

It's been at least an hour
since he showered
but the floor's still covered
with sad gray puddles:
is it so hard for a man
to dry his heavy feet
before stepping off the mat?

Piss droplets stain the rim
of the seat always left up
a dark yellow, dry and crusty;
little dark hairs line the shower
where tile meets tub,
sticking and staining
like the lines of black mold
crawling up the walls.

Dollops of toothpaste
glued to the sink; a strand
of dried bloody floss
from months ago; toothbrush
on dried shaving cream,
a dusty blue; the towel
always lumped on the floor
reeking of mildew –

why am I even here,
nowhere to dry my hands?

Oranges

Lying on my back, legs open wide, eyes on the white ceiling
with crown molding and a bronze ceiling fan
going round and round, speed level two, steady
like his tongue down there where he asked to be
and I said yes, unbuttoning that cream-colored blouse
with dime-sized oranges scattered over my upper body:
he was jealous of the fruit, wanted to feel exactly
where they'd already kissed my shoulders and nipples and ribs
now covered with goosebumps, the shirt a heap on the duvet,
our bodies sinking into the middle of this blue bed,
my hips trying to move with his blond head going up and down,
and maybe if I pretend I enjoy this I actually will, maybe,
like pretending the room is the perfect temperature although
that's why I have a remote for the fan's speed, slow, fast, in-between,
just the right touch on my skin but, look, he's still trying because to him
it's like freshly squeezed orange juice and to me it's just a white ceiling.

I Left the \$7 Chocolate Bar

sunbathing in the car
on the first spring day
in weeks; so much for
that treat you gave me,
for trying to save
the gooey goodness
in the passenger seat,
because when I threw it
to the dumpster, melted
batter funneled down
my wrist, became
dessert-turned-shit;
thank God for those
old napkins always
in the glovebox.

I drive away, you complain,
this is what happens, I see
you thinking, when I give you
these things, you throw them
away, just throw them away.

Table

In the living room he stood
entranced by the football game
on TV, unaware his girlfriend
behind him was quietly sliding
the coffee table back into place
after their afternoon yoga.

It was the glass of water
falling onto the shag rug
that got his attention.
She rushed to get paper towels
as he stood there, stagnant,
small man, poor thing,
feels like he's walking
on egg shells, he tells her later.

But he isn't, and couldn't be
if he's not moving at all, except
to have a few drinks at a bar
to forget the goddamn table
when he should have just
helped her to begin with –

no, it's her fault, right?
She should've asked for help.

To My Ex of One Hour

Hand grabbing throat, mouth filling, jaw unhinging,
I threw up the spinach salad and farfalle pasta
after arriving home from your place just now,

the last thing our mouths would ever share,

but nothing, nothing, not even seven Altoids,
could mask the bitter taste of bile besting my mouth,
the bitterness of too many months with you.

Losing It

Bright light screams through blinds
onto my bed. Outside, cardinals
squall their morning chorus.
I want to shoot those birds:
hands shake, eyes ache,
sleep shirt's drenched in sweat.
Later, I can't even pronounce
the word "newborn" in class
and when he comes over tonight
he'll see purple under my eyes,
swollen pimples dotting my face,
then gently pop them, wiping the pus,
holding me, waiting to leave till
I'm sound asleep, though those birds
will wake me too soon by singing
too loud: I wonder how I can
make them stop, make everything stop.

Four

Carlos, Before the Early Morning Ride

A banana for me, timothy hay
for you, we both let out a yawn.
Yours is much bigger, dusty black
nostrils each the size of my mouth
opened wide, your long pink tongue
stretching into air, deep brown eyes
rolling back in your head so I can see
the whites and a gooey grey scrap of sleep;
I had one too this morning, a little crustier.

I fasten the halter over tall bay ears,
untrimmed to keep away those horseflies
so hungry in summer, and we pace
from dewy pasture to grooming area,
feet damp as we arrive at the hitching post.
I tie a slip knot and rub the curry comb
over your coat to loosen earth's muck
from yesterday's afternoon roll.

Dandy brush in hand flicks away dirt
before I settle the saddle on your back,
cinching it in place with the leather girth.
Bridle latched, we walk uphill to the ring,
your ears perking forward as another day
shines through the pines in misty rays.

My Mother and Horses

1968, 1981

Her family drove to Uncle Ben's in the countryside
a few times every year, and she'd get to ride a pony,
savoring the dirt, the grime, the dopamine.

Pop Pop promised to buy her a horse as a wedding gift,
so she kept drawing horse heads and reading
veterinary textbooks until she walked down the aisle
and asked her father where the horse was:
"You weren't supposed to remember that."

2005

In the winters when we lessoned together,
mother-daughter beginners, she rode her favorite,
old Toby, and brushed him afterwards to the tune
of "In the Bleak Midwinter"; his ears relaxed,
his lower lip drooped, all twenty-eight years of him
settled into his blanket, kissed goodnight
by the chapped lips and pink cheeks of Mom.

2012

Dad picked me up from basketball practice
and drove us through the dormant cotton fields
to the stable, where Mom stood by Cruz's stall,
weeping in the dark night, cold hands gripping
steel bars. I'd never seen an animal lie so still
as that black horse on his side, already bloated.

It was an aortic aneurysm, heart explosion
out of nowhere, mother's dream stallion,
soon to be buried, just seven years old.

(continued, next page)

2014

I got the call from our trainer, frantic:
that palomino rogue Bud had bucked
Mom off. I left the house to fetch Dad
and we sped on Highway 43 to the barn
to find her slouched in the tack room,
eyelids black and blue, the arms
she'd stretched out as she flew,
askew, broken in two pieces.

2018

She comes to all my shows, assists
with polishing boots and filming
my courses with Carlos. I can tell
when she pats him, whispers into
his ears, that she is home again,
happy to just stand next to him:
oh, her gentle, steady hands,
and how she loves the animals.

Getting Ready for the Show

Head high, nostrils flaring,
the lone horse in the barn,

Carlos, lets out a whinny
from the grooming bay
to the lush green paddock,

the truck's engine rehearsing
its soft roar just outside.

His tail lifts to swish biting flies,
legs ready to run and jump.
I busy myself with rubbing

a towel over his glowing coat,
polishing hooves with oil,

breathing slowly to steady
my nervous pulse and thoughts.
Paddock boots crunch over gravel

between barn and waiting trailer
as I run through the list one more –

hay, grain, saddle, bridle, brushes, boots –
then open the back door, its ramp
soon to be stepped on and closed,

a thirty minute drive to the show,
both of us twitching the whole ride.

The Fall

We are cantering around the turn, approaching
the white fence when he plants his front hooves
into the sand footing as my body moves into position
to jump - arms following the bit, elbows bending,
heels and back lowering, eyes looking forward -
but he does not jump, just stops, my bottom above
the saddle pommel, his head going forward and down
instead of up, my chest now on his neck, chin by ears,
body shifting left as I go right, both feet leaving
the stirrups as my hips rotate ninety degrees in mid-air,
hands slipping from the reins as he pulls away,
boots knocking the wooden rails from their cups:
he gallops back to the in-gate as I thud to the ground,
flat on my back, gloved hands cupping my head
as if about to do a sit-up, sunshine glaring into wide eyes.

Chamora

The trainer groomed Chamora one last time
on that overcast December afternoon,
hands brushing thick coat as she mumbled

“I love you” and wiped teary eyes.
The old mare could no longer stand
the frigid winds and frozen grounds,

so they walked down to the abandoned field,
her frail limbs limping as the other horses
galloped, heads high, neighed goodbye

to the matriarch of the farm, the queen
who’d once jumped five feet in the Grand Prix.
But too soon the vet was there with his gun

when from the barn I heard two hollow shots,
followed by a distant scream and sobs.

Off

I can tell you're off today, walking faster
than usual, not talking to me as much,
so I know what to do: let out a whinny,
forego a few extra bites of sweet hay
to head your way. *Carlos!* you say, smiling,
entering my pasture, and I love to hear
my name like that, tasty as carrots,

but after you give me a slow massage
and hop on, I can tell you're still off:
tense hands and legs hold on to me
too hard, stress and stiffness seizing
your fingers, elbows, and hips.

I wish you weren't off, but that's okay,
even horses have bad days too,
so I lean my head in close, press
my warm nose to your palm and just stay there,
breathing in and out your soft hands
smelling of my favorite peppermints:
neither one of us moves an inch.

At the Water Trough

Long neck stretches low
into black oval basin,
muzzle softly nudging
water's dusty surface:
sips glide down his throat
like minnows swimming
in a murky lake: where
cheeks meet neck, the swallow
pulses up and down but stops
when his head lifts back up,
chin dripping, lips licking,

the corners of his mouth
stretching upward, as if
he's smiling, like me.

Night Check

The moon lights my path from house to barn through the hum of crickets and cicadas, a short walk uphill to the yellow stable, dark and nearly silent with the horses chomping on hay if chomping on anything at all. I approach my gelding's stall, last one on the right, and see as I turn on the light that his eyes are closed, then opening and blinking, fluttering a few times like mine did when mom woke me up by flipping the switch. He has been sleeping, shavings scattered in his mane and tail, under his soft brown belly and on his hocks and elbows, his right hind leg slightly flexed, resting and relaxed; I whisper his name and both ears point towards my eyes, the only part of his body in motion, he is happy to see me and I him, offering a red and white striped candy from my palm, an evening treat before I check water and hay, enough to get him through the night, bringing the wheelbarrow and pitchfork to the stall, removing the piles, freshening the bedding, a few final pats for the day. I darken the barn, night check complete: sweet dreams, Carlos.

Last Horse Show of the Year

Wool blankets cloak the backs of clipped horses
walking to the ring among fallen leaves
while riders cram the in-gate, learning courses,
stuttering curses to frozen toes and ears
through the dim chill of mid-November air
warmed by gumbo, hot cocoa, and heat lamps
until it's time to trot the frisky mares
and geldings round the schooling ring in laps,
freshening legs to jump the last fences
of this season, riders obeying commands,
turn left, look right, slow down, our shoulders tense
heading up the ramp to the crowded stands
loud with applause as the final bell sounds
before barns flee winter, trailering southbound.